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ABSTRACT

The Speech Communication Association's (SCA) decision to participate in a boycott of convention facilities to press for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) has been ineffective (not a single state has ratified the ERA since the inception of the boycott) and may be counterproductive. In Illinois, the boycott was aimed primarily at the hotel facilities in Chicago, but the state legislature is dominated by downstate politicians, so the boycott does not affect those whose votes need to be changed. Further, the SCA's decision to boycott was conveyed to the governor of the state and the party leaders in the legislature, but word never reached the membership of either house. Such a boycott disrupts only a small portion of the total convention revenues, and since many conventions are booked years in advance, the hotels are only too glad to cancel in favor of more lucrative bookings. Furthermore, since the hotels are likely to cut primarily women and minority staff members to compensate for lost revenues, the boycott ends up being counterproductive. Most of the groups boycotting for ERA ratification have a membership that is much smaller and on a tighter budget than those organizations continuing to use hotel facilities, so their political impact is minimal. While the boycott may be an important symbolic gesture, survey results indicate that it alienates potential supporters among the uncommitted and is being carried out at the expense of more effective direct mail and phone campaigns aimed at legislators. (HTH)

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Boycott As a Persuasive Tactic in Attempting to Ratify E.R.A.

by

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(A paper delivered at the Southern States Speech Communication Association
convention, Hot Springs, Arkansas, April, 1982)

In a sense, this paper is an update on an S.C.A. sponsored debate which
was held nearly a year and a half ago at the annual conference of the as-
sociation in New York. At that time there were two more years to run on
the E.R.A. extension and the debate focused on the resolution : "Resolved--
That the S.C.A. Rescind Its Boycott of Non-E.R.A. Ratifying States". I
served as the second affirmative in that debate. Since then not only has
the deadline for ratification come closer with the passage of time, but
I have also received and tabulated the surveys of over one fourth of the
Illinois House and Senate in regards to their ratings of various sources,
messages and channels as to persuasive potential. These results, along
with the events that have or have not transpired since the S.C.A. debate
lead me to hold more strongly with the sense of the resolution. Boycott
as a persuasive tactic in this case is not only ineffective(as witnessed
by the fact that not a single state has ratified the E.R.A. since the
inception of the boycott by our association and by other professional
societies) but indeed it is counter-productive. Further, the/use of
potential
boycott by other more powerful organizations is dangerous to the
amendment ratification process, in my opinion, and we ought not continue
to set such a precedent. Let me recount for you, how I came to that
position.

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Shortly after the S.C.A. decision to boycott states which had not ratified the E.R.A., the amendment came up for a critical vote in Illinois. My spouse and I are both supporters of passage and are hence part of a League of Women Voters telephone tree. Since our representatives in the DeKalb area were somewhat wobbly on the issue, we were urged to contact them and urge that they vote in favor of the ratification. Further, we were asked to contact other persons who might also phone or write the legislators to urge ratification. The persons we phoned included several the leading advocates of passage of the amendment on campus such as officers in an organization called Academic Women for Equality; members of S.C.A.--male and female--who had heartily endorsed the boycott; and even an officer in S.C.A.'s Women's Caucus. To our amazement not a single person we called had either written to or telephoned their local representatives and senators to urge passage of the amendment. All of the literature on legislator/constituency interaction indicates that it is the individual letter or phone-call or visit to the office which influences legislative votes most effectively. Yet, here some of the persons who ought to have been in the forefront of such attempts to influence their representatives had totally ignored the toll-free phone lines and or the mails or personal visits as channels through which to contact and sway the legislator. That experience led me to do a variety of research concerning the effect of the boycotts of non-E.R.A. ratifying states by various groups and especially to look at the ^{tactic's} effectiveness or lack of effectiveness in my home state--Illinois. That research has led me to the belief that the boycott is counter productive and may be dangerous as a precedent-setting tactic.

Illinois is in unusual state in the ratification process. First, the legislature is dominated in both houses by downstate legislators--persons

who represent districts out of the Chicago/Suburban area. In fact, most represent districts . . . do not even include a large city where conventions are held. Second, Illinois requires what is called the "extra-ordinary majority" vote for passage of national amendments. Three fifths or 60% of both houses must vote to ratify any constitutional amendments. When this requirement was found to be unconstitutional as it was worded in the 1970 Illinois Constitution, it was ^{then} included in the by-laws of the legislature as an operating rule, and by-laws are not affected by the legal determination of unconstitutionality. As a result, legislators in Illinois can vote both for and against E.R.A. and can return to their home districts touting their support and opposition to various groups depending on the position on E.R.A. which the group espouses. The legislator can vote for E.R.A. when it comes up for the 3/5's vote and can vote against it when the vote to set aside the extra-ordinary majority rule comes up. If you know anything about legislators, you will recognize that this is an ideal position for them--they please all and offend none.

These two characteristics--downstate dominance of both houses and the extra-ordinary majorities rule point up two reasons why Boycott is an ineffective persuasive tool, at least in Illinois. Boycotts in a generic sense try to avoid purchase of or use of some product or service in order to force compliance due to loss of income or privilege. The S.C.A. boycott and others like it boycott not so much the state of Illinois as the City of Chicago. The downstate majority of both the Senate and the House don't feel the impact of the boycott in any significant way. In fact many downstaters chuckle in glee when Chicago has problems of any kind. Presumably they are happy about a boycott of Chicago. So the S.C.A. boycott is misconceived--it doesn't affect those who need to be affected in order to change their votes. In fact,

the Chicago delegation in both houses overwhelmingly if not unanimously vote time after time to ratify E.R.A. Another reason the boycott is ineffective relates to the channel used to convey the S.C.A. decision to the members of the Illinois and presumably other legislatures in non-ratifying states. The executive secretary sent a notice to the Governor and the majority and minority leaders in both houses. To my knowledge such notifications are simply not communicated to the membership of the Senate or the House. As an aide to the governor told me, "Those notifications are 'filed' if you know what I mean". When I wondered why he told me "Hell the Governor has enough trouble with the legislature as it is. Why needle them over E.R.A.?" What would have happened if the membership in both houses had been notified. In the opinion of the staff of the Illinois Legislative Council--the bi-partisan research arm of the legislature--they would have asked "Who is S.C.A. and how many of them live in my district?".

Another aspect of the boycott issue relates to the effect it has on convention business as compared with total yearly convention business. Whether you use the figure of \$28 Million of lost business which N.O.W. claims or the \$7 million figure used by the Chicago Convention bureau, you are still talking about a figure which is either one tenth or four-tenths of one percent of total Chicago convention business. The \$28 million dollar figure is calculated on the assumption that no lost business would be re-booked and on the assumption that all of the boycotting groups would have decided to go to Chicago for five straight years if there had been no boycott. Both of those assumptions are clearly fallacious. Furthermore, much of the lost business had been booked as much as five or six years earlier in pre-oil embargo, 4% inflation times. Thus the boycott was a boon to some hotels, allowing them to get out from under unprofitable

commitments. And when business is lost, hotels and convention facilities simply reduce staff to cut costs. Most of this staff consists of either women or minorities. So the boycott is misconceived in another sense in that it hurts not only the friends of E.R.A.--the Chicago delegations to the Senate and House--but it also hurts women and minorities.

A third way in which the boycott is misconceived relates to the kind of clout groups like S.C.A. or S.S.C.A. or other professional societies have in terms of economic impact. Most of the groups which voted to boycott non-E.R.A. ratification states are small, liberal, and to be blunt, have a membership which is chintzy when compared to other convention business. They want to book a weekday or two and Saturday night at rock bottom rates; their members rarely rent suites; their parties rarely utilize cash bars run by the hotel; and most members are on a very limited budget which precludes lavish dinners, tips, and so on. For example, when S.C.A. went to Minneapolis, about 2,000 members and friends booked rooms. This number can be handled by one or two of the downtown hotels. When the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Singing in America (Hardly one of your well-known fraternal societies) booked Minneapolis the same year between 10 and 15,000 members and friends attended, and they booked every single room in town and at premium rates. The persons in attendance were frequently on lavish expense accounts which allowed them dinner extravaganzas at the Hotsy Totsy room of the various hotels. In comparison to groups like the S.P.E.B.S.Q.S.A. we are extremely small potatoes. Thus our decision to boycott lacks realistic impact.

decision

"Nonetheless," some might say, "the boycott/was a symbolic one, and that is what counts. Even if it swayed only a few or even one legislator through its symbolic meaning, it would be worth it." That might be so, but the testimony of leaders in the House and Senate who are co-sponsors

of the ratification bill runs counter to that idea. Representative Harold Katz, one of the bill's sponsors puts it this way:

This boycott alienates potential supporters among the uncommitted, polarizing instead of solidifying. Offended by the tactic, yet unaffected by the boycott, the down-state uncommitted legislator whose votes are sought and needed become less open to persuasion. . .How would you react to an effort to cause you to change your vote on a Constitutional Amendment, not by an appeal to your reason but by a threat?

Survey results support his position. When asked to rate the credibility of groups like ours which are out of state and not usually known for political activity, legislators in my survey indicated that we have good potential persuasiveness. Nearly two-thirds of them rated groups like ours as having "some" or "great" credibility or effectiveness. However, our "symbolic" boycott is rated as having "No" or "Negative" credibility or effectiveness by 75% of the legislators with nearly 46% rating boycotts as having "Negative" impact on their decisions on voting for or against ratification. So, not only does the boycott hurt the friends of E.R.A. in Illinois, while it puts women and/or minorities out of work, but it has the added disadvantage of offending uncommitted legislators who rate boycotts as negative or ineffective ways to sway their votes. Whatever symbolic value there might have been in enacting a boycott is negated by the response of legislators to this tactic.

Although I have no quantitative data on my next point, I do have considerable anecdotal evidence concerning the impact a boycott decision can have on the membership of the organization which decides to pass a boycott resolution. While such a vote does have the symbolic value

of uniting and, in Bowers and Ochs terminology, in solidifying those in favor of using this tactic to pass the E.R.A. resolutions, it has other effects. Once the persons in an organization have taken the symbolic action in passing the boycott resolution, it becomes much more difficult to motivate them to take other actions such as writing or phoning their own legislators (my phone-tree experience for example) or, in the case of persons in states which have ratified the proposition, it is next to impossible to motivate them to write to friends, relatives and acquaintances in non-ratifying states to urge them to notify their representatives. So the overall effect of the boycott on the number of impactful (i.e., personalized) calls which come over a legislator's phones or letters which cross his or her desk is to greatly reduce the total volume. Yet, it is this kind of communication which legislators rate most impactful in changing their minds. 99% of legislators rate sources from the ^{home} district who are known supporters as having "Great Effect" on influencing the legislator's opinion and vote. Even when the source is a known opponent of the legislator but is from the home district, nearly 70 % of the legislators rate that source as having some or great effect on opinion and vote.

In short, if E.R.A. is dead in Illinois, as it certainly appears to be, I am convinced that part of the reason for its demise lies in the decision by S.C.A. and organizations like it to boycott Chicago as a convention site as well as the cities like Chicago in other non-E.R.A. ratifying states. Such boycotts don't target the appropriate legislators--the conservative, downstate senator or representative. Instead the legislators from the large cities seem to be the target, and they already support passage of the E.R.A. amendment. This is the case, not only in Illinois, but in Georgia where legislators from Atlanta overwhelmingly support passage. The pattern also recurs in Arizona, Florida and elsewhere. Secondly,

the boycott offends the potentially persuadable legislator by attempting to coerce votes. The boycott tactic, in this case at least, is financially most punitive to those whom it purports to be supporting--women and minorities who are the first laid off when a hotel cancels a convention(which they may even be glad to do if the meeting has been booked during non-inflationary times). Finally, if we are to believe the results of my survey of the Illinois Senate and House, and if they are at all representative of legislators in other states, the decision to boycott changes organizations like S.C.A. from initially highly credible and thus potentially persuasive sources to sources with no or negative credibility, while at the same time it reduces the number of personal calls and or letters which the legislator is likely to receive. Given all of these detriments, I believe that boycott as a tactic in the case of the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment is not only ineffective but counter-productive and ill-advised. Undoubtedly we will be faced with similar decisions in the future whenever the amendment is renewed or re-introduced as new legislation. Let us hope that organizations like ours do not choose to use this tactic until all other avenues of persuasion have been tried including ones like ^{that used by} the Central Conference of American Rabbis. They chose to meet in non-ratifying states like Arizona where they cancelled their regular convention activities and went en masse' to the Arizona legislature and engaged in the kind of persuasion which is most effective with legislators--personal, face-to-face, discussion and argument. In a way, I am personally glad that this tactic did not work, though I would like to see the Equal Rights Amendment ratified. I worry about what might be the end result if large and powerful groups like the Catholic Church, the Shriners, the Insurance industry and so on were to try to use boycott to pass any one of the many amendments to the Constitution

being considered by the U.S. congress--amendments like revoking a woman's right to an abortion, prayer in the schools, and one which would revoke the Fifth Amendment which allows persons to remain silent without incriminating themselves. If groups with real clout had seen the boycott tactic succeed, they might have utilized it in regard to these and other potentially dangerous amendments.